

Watering down the past: the mosaics from Zeugma

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A complete wash-out. Do they give a dam?

In 2000 the water behind the newly-constructed Birecik dam began to engulf twenty-two square miles of Turkish territory, consigning the meandering progress of the river Euphrates to history. As the land slid slowly below the surface, so disappeared the hopes of archaeologists who had been racing against time to survey, excavate, and record the extensive remains of a vibrant ancient city.

They were struggling to save a site called Zeugma, identified by scholars in the 1970s. The presence of important antiquities had been known for much longer, not only to archaeologists, however, but also to looters. They had taken advantage of the rich pickings, removing numerous ancient artefacts, especially mosaics, and selling them to public and private art collections in America and Europe.

Around 2300 years ago, Seleucus I Nicator, a successor of Alexander the Great, founded the twin cities of Seleucia and Apamea, later called Zeugma, on either side of the Euphrates. He named one after himself and the other after his Iranian wife. Both the names and the physical location symbolized the junction between east and west, the bridge acting as the only crossing point for miles around.

The town came under Roman domination in the first century B.C. The Euphrates formed the natural boundary between the Roman and Parthian Empires, and Zeugma prospered both militarily and commercially from this position. In the second and early third centuries A.D., Zeugma was a bustling city, probably larger than Roman London. A legion was stationed there, spending their wages on food, entertainment, and other goods. Important figures in the Imperial system served in the town. Septimius Severus, for example, was stationed there as a senior officer and went on to become emperor (A.D. 193–211).

Entertainment was evident too. Inscriptions attest to boxing and athletic contests. A group of travelling entertainers had their base in Zeugma and left their mark in the form of graffiti in a nearby town. The region harboured wild beasts of the sort which would draw crowds at amphitheatres across the Empire.

However the high life was under threat. In the late second century at least part of the Roman legion was removed and the city's importance began to wane. In the middle of the third century Zeugma was sacked by Shapur I, the king of the Sasanians, an Iranian tribe who had brought an end to Parthian rule in the region. As a result the city never regained its former glory and was left to dwindle, finally passing out of the historical record in the tenth century A.D.

Living it up

As the archaeologists carefully removed the build-up of centuries of natural erosion, they came across collapsed roofs associated with the Sasanian attacks and the abandonment of the city. When they sifted through the roof tiles, nails, burnt timbers, and charcoal, walls began to appear covered in bright paints to imitate marble veneer, sometimes framing figures from ancient myth such as Odysseus' wife Penelope.

The finds associated with these houses suggested a hasty

departure by the inhabitants. In one, a wall cabinet containing a prized collection of glass had smashed across the floor. Other personal items included lamps, coins, keys, rings, figurines, a dagger and sword, all lying among the debris. A bronze statue of the god Mars, stashed in a storeroom in an effort to save it, remained unclaimed by its owners.

The houses had occupied a steeply-banked hill rolling down to the water's edge. This area had been carefully terraced over the years, the bedrock cut to form level platforms for the construction of both public and private buildings. These contained elaborate mosaics decorated with both figurative and geometric patterns, each one built up laboriously from thousands of small pieces of cut stone with glass for highlights in vivid greens and blues.

They were found in rooms for the reception of guests, where business or other, less formal, activities took place. Hugging the walls were areas of geometric decoration surrounding figurative scenes, as if pictures had been placed in the centre of the floor. A number of different themes were illustrated, mostly drawn from mythology. These include the marriage of Dionysos and Ariadne, and Achilles discovered by Odysseus on Skyros. More obscure narratives were also popular. A mosaic portraying Metiochus and Parthenope tells the story of their argument over dinner about the nature of love, a subject appropriate to a room where both dining and discussion took place. Looters had tunneled down to this floor and robbed the central figures. The scene was only recognised when reunited with fragments belonging to an American Art collection, now returned to Turkey.

These floors are among those of the highest quality in the Near East. At Antioch and another city called Apamea, both on the Orontes river, mosaics with similar themes decorate the prestigious homes of the wealthy. The owners wanted pavements to reflect their status and culture. Situated in rooms where guests were received, they not only provided topics of conversation during which the host could show off his erudition, but also alluded to activities associated with the room itself, such as drinking and dining.

Theatre on the floor

I would like to concentrate on another floor with a literary theme appropriate to its context. It belongs to a house, excavated by a team of French and Turkish archaeologists, which was both large and elaborately decorated. It is situated in an important residential zone close to the civic centre.

Within the house were many rooms containing fine mosaics decorated with geometric designs. Off an interior courtyard with a fountain was found the floor in question. The room had another smaller doorway leading directly to the kitchen and service quarters, suggesting that it was used for dining.

The pavement was decorated not only to provide a pleasing effect but also to divide up the floor into specific areas. If you think of your sitting room, rugs are arranged around the furniture (not under it!), so their decoration is shown off to the best advantage. Such is the case in this room: a geometric design marks out a U-shape onto which three couches were placed

facing in towards the highlight of the decoration, a centrally-placed picture mosaic.

Surrounded by a rectangular border, containing an exquisite floral scroll populated by figures of Cupid hunting real and mythical animals, is the main pictorial field. It depicts three women, two young and one old, seated in front of an architectural facade containing three doors. In front of the two younger women is a three-legged bronze table on which sits a silver drinking cup. To their right is a servant. Next to the elder woman, another servant holds out a silver cup to her. The identity of the scene and the artist who created it are made clear by a Greek inscription which reads 'Zosimos made the *Women at Breakfast*'. A floor from a neighbouring house is inscribed 'by Zosimos of Samosata' suggesting an individual or workshop operating in Zeugma out of Samosata, a nearby town.

The subject of the mosaic is a play, *The Women at Breakfast*, by Menander, the most famous ancient comedy writer, who was active in the later fourth century B.C. The illustration of such an old play may in the first instance seem a strange practice but, for example, we might think of the continued reproduction of Shakespeare's plays by Hollywood or even the reinvention of his life in a film like *Shakespeare in Love*. This mosaic even includes details such as contemporary dress and props which suggests that the play continued to be popular at theatrical festivals.

Two other reproductions of this scene in mosaic survive. Each of the mosaics shows an almost identical image, even though they are separated by both time and geographical location. This suggests that they all drew on the same model and are, therefore, reformulations of a specific and famous image, perhaps a painting. As the original does not survive, we can only know it through these repetitions – just as it might be possible in the future to recognise a famous Van Gogh through the multitude of posters, key rings, fridge magnets and suchlike which are sold from galleries and shops.

The mosaic from Zeugma operates on a number of different levels. It refers to a famous original, thus giving the patron the opportunity to claim an understanding of art history and the ownership of a masterpiece, even if remade in mosaic. It implies a knowledge of Greek culture and a desire to associate with this classical heritage. It also brought pleasure to the owner and may have alluded to a particular character trait, such as being a regular theatre-goer.

Equally, the mosaic was appropriate to its context in a dining room. Performances or readings from Menander's plays may have taken place here as part of an evening's entertainment. The image could have sparked a discussion about this or another of Menander's plays. It also provided a safe topic of conversation, even when the most difficult guests came to dinner!

The mosaic depicts a specific point in the play, unfortunately fragmentary, where the old woman is wondering if anyone will give her another drink and bemoans the fact that the servant has moved the table and cup away from her. In contrast to this, the picture shows the opposite: the servant is handing her a drink. Perhaps the owner intended his guests to read the image as 'Have another drink!', an exhortation to party. Alternatively, if the comedy is based on the old woman's drunken antics, then this may well be a warning to the diners not to overindulge themselves! Whichever it is, the patron had carefully guarded against some of the problems associated with eating and drinking. He had installed a water channel so that any mess from a riotous party could be easily sluiced from the room and his fine mosaic floor preserved for the next event.

History does not come out in the wash

The waters have now flooded over two thirds of the site. The hydroelectric power station, the largest of its kind in the world, has begun supplying Turkey with the power for which it was designed. The pressurized work of the archaeologists has

brought to light a city which was linguistically, culturally, religiously, and ethnically diverse, while the huge efforts of conservationists have preserved much of it for future generations. The waves, however, continue to eat away at the city and without a watchful eye further works of Zosimos may be lost for ever.

Will Wootton recently completed his doctorate on the techniques of mosaic production in the ancient world at the Queen's College, Oxford University. He has just taken up a Research Fellowship in Roman Art at King's College, London.